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ABSTRACT

Subjective and objective covariates of family life satisfaction among husbands and wives were examined. Interviews were conducted in the Spring of 1976 with 974 married adults selected by means of both probability and modified probability sampling designs. Independent indicators were categorized into three general groups: familial characteristics, personal characteristics, and domains of satisfaction. Multiple regression analyses indicate that among husbands, family life satisfaction is positively related to satisfactions with leisure, friendships, marriage and work and to number of wage-earners in the family and own employment status; satisfaction is negatively related to the employment status of the wife and financial satisfaction. Among wives' satisfactions with friendships, marriage, leisure, and life in general positively covary with family life satisfaction, as does age at first marriage and employment status of the husband; age itself is found to relate negatively. The findings indicate both similarities and differences regarding primary indicators of family life quality. (Author)

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Social Indicators of Family Life Satisfaction: A Comparison of Husbands and Wives*

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*Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Council on Family Relations, Philadelphia, October, 1978. The data were made available by the National Opinion Research Center through the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research.

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Social Indicators of Family Life Satisfaction:

A Comparison of Husbands and Wives

ABSTRACT

This study examines subjective and objective covariates of family life satisfaction among husbands and wives. Interviews were conducted in the Spring of 1976 with 974 married adults selected by means of both probability and modified probability sampling designs. Independent indicators were categorized into three general groups: familial characteristics, personal characteristics, and domains of satisfaction. Multiple regression analyses indicate that among husbands family life satisfaction is positively related to satisfactions with leisure, friendships, marriage and work, and to number of wage-earners in the family and own employment status; satisfaction is negatively related to the employment status of the wife and financial satisfaction. Among wives satisfactions with friendships, marriage, leisure, and life in general positively covary with family life satisfaction, as does age at first marriage and employment status of the husband; age itself is found to relate negatively. The findings indicate both similarities and differences regarding primary indicators of family life quality. Discussion focuses upon how family life interacts with other life domains, and upon the differing life experiences of husbands and wives.

Social Indicators of Family Life Satisfaction:

A Comparison of Husbands and Wives

Understanding the quality of married and family life has long been a concern of students of the family. Research has typically focused upon the marital dyad, and has attempted to delineate social and psychological factors that have importance for marriage adjustment, satisfaction, and happiness. Though a variety of factors have been repeatedly examined in attempting to explain marriage satisfaction (Hicks and Platt, 1970; Glenn and Weaver, 1978), the more general area of family life satisfaction has been severly underresearched.

The study of family life satisfaction, much like that concerning marriage adjustment, contains both conceptual and methodological ambiguities. The "family life" domain is not easily bounded, nor is it clear what one visualizes when asked to reflect on family life (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976:336). Respondents who are asked to report their level of satisfaction with family living may primarily focus on children, parents, siblings, or spouse, or upon decision-making, communication, or conflict patterns in the family. But even though the parameters of family life are ambiguous, "it clearly includes components of life experiences which are essential to a general understanding of quality of life" (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976: 345).

Satisfaction with family life, at least among some groups, appears to be substantially related to overall life quality. Medley (1976) found satisfaction in this area to be a primary predictor of life satisfaction among the aged; a similar finding is reported by Mancini (1978) among the middle-aged. When discussing respondent perceptions about their families, Andrews and Withey (1976:265-266) report that, "Here

we have the strongest expression of delight and pleasure of any of the domains of life," and, "the family seems to be a rather robust source of pleasure..." The available literature consistently indicates that satisfaction with family life is potentially a substantial contributor to an overall feeling of well-being (also see Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976; Bubolz, 1977).

RATIONALE FOR THE STUDY

The present secondary analysis seeks to identify subjective and objective indicators of family life satisfaction for both husbands and wives. Contemporary quality of life research recognizes the necessity of examining indicators which represent respondent interpretations and definitions (such as satisfaction with friend relations or with leisure), as well as variables that are "observable fact," such as income, household size, or age (Andrews and Withey, 1976:8). This decision to focus on both the objective and subjective aspects of reality was also influenced by the general inability of solely objective factors to account for much of the variability in family life satisfaction (Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976) or in the related area of marriage satisfaction (Glenn and Weaver, 1978).

It is widely recognized that research should account for the separate realities of wives and husbands. Bernard (1972:4) notes that, "For there is by now a very considerable body of well-authenticated research to show that there really are two marriages in every union, and that they do not always coincide." It is expected that the degree of family life satisfaction experienced by husbands and wives in this sample will be differentially influenced by the various social indicators, since they

reflect variation in socialization processes and participation in adult roles.

This examination of the quality of family life does not involve hypothesis-testing. Though ideally family research should flow from existing theory and its accompanying hypotheses, the case of family life satisfaction is one in which a "research-then-theory" strategy may be appropriate (see Reynolds, 1971). At the present time there is little previous research to guide current strategies and hypothesis-formulation. In addition, current theory appears ineffective in accounting for the wide array of social indicators included in this study. Consideration was given to extrapolating from the research and theory on marriage satisfaction in order to predict correlates of family life satisfaction. However, a recent comprehensive examination of the quality of married life suggests considerable inconsistency in terms of findings and theory (Glenn and Weaver, 1978). In effect, then, this analysis tests a series of hypotheses which assume no relationship between each social indicator and family life satisfaction.

RELATED LITERATURE

Only a few researchers have examined correlates of family life satisfaction. One of the earlier research efforts was conducted in Finland by Haavio-Mannila (1971), who found that family was more germane to general happiness than work or leisure. Upon looking at sex differences in family life satisfaction, women were more dissatisfied than men but there were no differences between husbands and wives. When controls on social class were instituted, the family life satisfaction of men decreased as class was lower, while among women those in the lower classes

were more satisfied (Haavio-Mannila, 1971:594).

A relatively comprehensive examination of the correlates of family life satisfaction is found in Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976). These researchers examined three categories of independent variables: early circumstances, personal characteristics, and perceptions of family relationships. Early circumstances, such as father's education, size of hometown, and intactness of family of orientation had little influence on satisfaction. Personal characteristics were somewhat more important. Moderate positive relationships were found between satisfaction and marital status, age, education, and family income. Substantially more of the variability in family life satisfaction was attributable to spousal and parent-child relationship quality, and to closeness to parents and siblings. These authors conclude that one's relationships with children and spouse are major contributors to family life quality.

Since the available literature on this topic is practically nonexistant, the researcher is hard-pressed to rely solely on it for subsequent empirical study. Consequently, the recent literature on marriage satisfaction was also used in deciding upon the array of independent variables. It should again be noted, however, that because of the lack of concurrence in the adjustment literature, the magnitude or direction of relationship is not presumed. Most independent variables were derived from the previous work of Hicks and Platt (1970), Campbell, Converse and Rodgers (1976), and Glenn and Weaver (1978).

Personal characteristics included age, age at first marriage, ever separated or divorced status, church attendance, vote participation,

employment status (full-time, part-time, and not employed), and occupational prestige. Spouse and family characteristics included number of children, education and employment status of spouse, number of family wage-earners, family income, urbanicity, and household size. A third general category concerned domains of satisfaction. This type of variable has not been typically included in the previous literature, but does represent a potentially meaningful component in family life quality. Respondents were asked how satisfied they were with each of the following areas of their lives: work, residence, leisure, friendships, finances and marriage. And since all of these satisfaction domains are theoretically components of general well-being, the variable of life satisfaction was also included.

METHODS

This inquiry is based on interview data collected in the Spring of 1976 by the National Opinion Research Center. Both a multistage modified probability sample with quotas at the block level, and a full probability model with predesignated respondents were utilized (see Davis, 1976; Glenn, 1977). The original sample contained 1499 respondents, 18 years of age and older, living in non-institutionalized environments in the coterminous United States. The present analysis is based on only those respondents who were married at the time of the interview (N=974, 521 wives and 453 husbands).

In this sample the husbands and wives were comparable in terms of race, family income, household size, education level of spouse, number of children, full-time employment, and ever-divorced status. There were differences regarding age, own education level, and indi-

vidual income. Wives, on the average, were four (4) years younger, slightly less educated, and had substantially lower incomes. About 60% of the employed wives had yearly incomes of $5,000 or less as compared to only 13% of the employed husbands.

Family life satisfaction was assessed by the following single-item indicator:

> "How much satisfaction do you get from your family life--a very great deal, a great deal, quite a bit, a fair amount, some, a little, or none?"

These scores ranged from zero (no satisfaction) to seven (a very great deal of satisfaction). Measurement of many of the independent variables is somewhat straightforward, thus they are not discussed in detail. Occupational categories and prestige scores were derived from Siegel (1971). All of the various satisfaction domains were measured by single-item indicators. For example, the item concerning marriage satisfaction asked, "Taking all things together, how would you describe your marriage--would you say that your marriage is very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" Life satisfaction was also assessed by a solitary item: "Taken all together, how would you say things are these days--would you say that you are very happy, pretty happy, or not too happy?" Additional information concerning the independent variables can be found in Davis (1976) or can be obtained from the present author.

RESULTS

The distribution of family life satisfaction scores is contained in Table 1. About 72% of wives and 85% of husbands report themselves

as being satisfied with family life "a great deal," or "a very great deal." Husbands and wives are not significantly different in their respective satisfaction levels.

-Insert Table 1 About Here-

The impact of the various social indicators on family life satisfaction, employing multiple regression analyses, are presented separately for wives (Table 2) and husbands (Table 3). The more important portions of these tables concern the columns labeled "beta." These are standardized partial regression coefficients and indicate the average change in the dependent variable that accompanies a unit change in the independent variable, holding all other independent variables constant (Kerlinger and Pedhazur, 1973:64). This method of statistical control is especially important since both the dependent and several independent variables concern domains of satisfaction. For example, satisfaction with family life, marriage, and leisure are conceptually components of life satisfaction. By including life satisfaction as an independent variable a more accurate estimate is obtained regarding the direct effects of the satisfaction domains on family life quality. While some multicollinearity does exist in this analysis, an inspection of the correlation matrices indicates few instances where it approaches an alarming level. Since the number of respondents per independent variable fell below 20 an adjusted R^2 statistic is computed. Adjusted R^2 is a conservatively biased estimate of the proportion of varianced explained (Nie, Hull, Jenkins, Steinbrenner and Bent, 1975), but in spite of this bias R^2 is considerable and remains significant.

Among the wives, significant contributors to family life satis-

faction are age at first marriage, age, employment status of the husband, and satisfactions with life, leisure, marriage and friendships. Family

-Insert Table 2 About Here-

life satisfaction varies positively with all of these variables, except for age, where a negative relationship exists.

Significant contributors among the husbands are the number of family wage-earners, employment status of the wife, own employment status, and satisfactions with work, finances, marriage, leisure and friendships. Family life satisfaction is positively related to satisfactions with friendships, leisure, marriage, and work, own employment status, and number of wage-earners, but negatively related to financial satisfaction and employment status of the wife.

-Insert Table 3 About Here-

A substantial proportion of the variance in family life satisfaction is accounted for among both husbands (Adjusted R^2 = .35) and wives (Adjusted R^2 = .38). Most of this variance is attributable to the subjective factors, such as leisure and marriage satisfaction, rather than those considered to be objective, such as age or income.

SUMMARY

1. There are no significant differences in the family life satisfaction scores of wives and husbands. Among both groups reported satisfaction levels are high.

2. Husbands and wives are similar in regard to primary indicators of satisfaction with family life: satisfaction with friendship, marriage, and leisure. However, friendship satisfaction is relatively more important for wives and leisure satisfaction is more important among husbands;

the importance of marriage satisfaction is about the same for both groups.

3. Distinct spousal differences are evident in other satisfaction domains. Among wives, overall life satisfaction is a significant covariate of family life, while satisfactions with finances and work are not. Among husbands, overall life satisfaction has little independent relationship to family life, while work and financial satisfaction are substantially related to it.

4. Spousal employment status influences the family life satisfaction of both husbands and wives. However, whereas the satisfaction of wives is positively influenced by husbands being employed, the satisfaction of husbands is negatively influenced by the employment of wives. Husbands and wives are also dissimilar in regard to the importance of number of wage-earners in the family and own employment status. These factors are not related to wives' satisfaction but are positively related to the family life satisfaction of the husbands.

5. Age-related factors appear more germane to the family life satisfaction of wives. Higher satisfaction levels are associated with older ages at first marriage, while age itself is negatively related to satisfaction. Age-related factors do not influence the family life satisfaction of husbands.

DISCUSSION

A few comments are appropriate in regard to the research limitations. While extant data, such as that provided by the General Social Survey, is relatively easy to access, the researcher has absolutely no control concerning relevant variables. Consequently, even though theory or

previous research might suggest incorporating specific variables, the extant data user can only employ factors decided upon by the original investigator. A related limitation of the omnibus survey concerns problems of measurement. In the case of this study, family life satisfaction was represented by a single-item indicator. It would have been preferable to partition the family life domain into parent-child relations and sibling relations, or to focus upon satisfactions with decision-making or methods of resolving conflict. There are several distinct advantages in using the NORC data. The sampling methodologies are superior to what most researchers employ, and the larger sample size is amenable to more comprehensive multivariate analyses. Finally, the sample is fairly representative of husbands and wives in the United States.

The findings of this investigation suggest that most husbands and wives report considerable satisfaction with their family life. Both the degree of satisfaction (Andrews and Withey, 1976; Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers, 1976), and the finding of no substantial difference in satisfaction between husbands and wives are consistent with earlier research (Haavio-Mannila, 1971). This generally high reporting of family life satisfaction is most interesting, especially given what appears to be a fair amount of instability and conflict in many American families. Perhaps the suggestion of Andrews and Withey (1976:265) is of value in explaining this apparent discrepancy:

> But these evaluations are, after all, admissions in an interview with some stranger, and in such a situation who would choose to denigrate one's family? In such a conversation even saying "mostly satisfied" may imply considerable reservation and lack of ease.

There is apparent support here for the importance of non-family domain experiences in facilitating healthier family living. Perhaps being more content with the use of time or with the quality of interaction with friends leads a husband or wife not to require as much gratification from family life. Participation in these alternate roles may provide one with a forum for emotional release and may represent a time when family roles and obligations become temporarily less salient. For wives a primary alternate domain of influence concerns friends, while for husbands it concerns leisure.

Results concerning the differential effects of spousal employment provide some insight into contemporary sex roles. Not surprisingly, husband employment and the satisfaction of wives covary positively. But the satisfaction of husbands and the wives' employment status are negatively related. Perhaps this is reflective of male responses to the ever-expanding employment roles of women. Negative effects on husbands may result from spending less time together, from greater home expectations of husbands, and from the lessening relative resources of the husband. These men may be experiencing strain due to the changing roles of their wives. It is somewhat paradoxical, however, to note that an increasing number of family wage-earners positively covaries with husbands' family life satisfaction; yet wives' employment negatively influences satisfaction. In families where there are multiple wage-earners, it is likely that the wife is providing supplementary resources. Perhaps husbands are more satisfied with family life when some of the financial burden is eased, but, at the same time, experience dissatisfaction because wives' employment deprives the husband of the power associated with being the sole provider of resources.

Additional husband-wife differences related to economics are the satisfactions with work and finances and own employment status, which are important for the family life quality of husbands only. These differences are likely to be manifestations of traditional socialization experiences and value-training. Contemporary society reinforces, among males moreso than females, the importance of employment for self-worth. Furthermore, male definitions of "worthwhile husband-father" focus substantiallly upon bringing resources into the family.

Two age-related factors are related only to wives' satisfaction. Older wives are less satisfied with family life, while wives who married at older ages are more satisfied. It is likely that older wives with grown children are experiencing considerable change in those family roles related to caring for children. Lower satisfaction may result, especially when alternate roles do not serve in a compensatory fashion. In the case of older ages at first marriage, the finding may be indicative of a greater opportunity to evaluate marital roles and expectations prior to entering marriage. Consequently, family living may be less disappointing for these wives, as compared to those who married at younger ages.

The current investigation has sought to identify differences between wives and husbands in regard to family life quality. Differences are apparent in fewer than half of the social indicators, and are found among both objective and subjective variables. For both husbands and wives, most of the variability in family life satisfaction is attributable to subjective indicators. Much like that concerning marriage satisfaction, the study of family life quality requires considerable additional research. A rather modest amount of variability in family life satisfaction is

explained when considering the wide array of independent variables that are examined. However, the findings of the present inquiry reveal some noteworthy differences between husbands and wives in how the family life domain is experienced within the context of alternate life spheres, personal characteristics, and spouse characteristics.

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Table 1. Distribution of Family Life Satisfaction Scores*

Degree of Satisfaction	Wives	Husbands
A Very Great Deal	172	203
A Great Deal	204	185
Quite a Bit	69	39
A Fair Amount	52	16
Some	10	4
A Little	10	5
None	1	0
(not ascertained or don't know)	3	1
	N=521	N=453

*"How much satisfaction do you get from your family life?" Mean family life satisfaction score among wives was 6.19 and 6.22 among husbands (t=0.45, n.s.).

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis of Contributors to Family Life Satisfaction Among Wives (N=345)

Variable	r	Beta	F Value
Friendship Satisfaction	.53	.38	61.36***
Marriage Satisfaction	.45	.21	14.94***
Leisure Satisfaction	.37	.18	14.43***
Life Satisfaction	.37	.11	4.30***
Age	-.01	-.10	2.10*
Age at First Marriage	.05	.08	2.11*
Employment Status of Husband	.03	.07	1.81*
Number of Children	-.08	.07	1.28
Number of Family Wage-Earners	-.08	-.06	1.20
Family Income	.01	-.06	1.03
Church Attendance	.07	.05	1.39
Financial Satisfaction	.14	.05	1.03
Household Size	-.10	-.05	0.71
Occupational Prestige	.08	-.04	0.49
Residence Satisfaction	.21	-.02	0.18
Ever-Divorced Status	.02	-.02	0.11
Educational Level of Spouse	.13	.02	0.11
Employment Status	-.02	.01	0.07
Work Satisfaction	.19	-.01	0.03
Urbanicity	-.09	-.01	0.02
Vote Participation	.07	-.01	0.01

Multiple R = .65, Adjusted R^2 = .38, F = 11.11, df = 21, 323, $p < .001$.

***$p < .001$
**$p < .01$
*$p < .05$

Table 3. Multiple Regression Analysis of Contributors to Family Life Satisfaction Among Husbands (N=303)

Variable	r	Beta	F Value
Leisure Satisfaction	.47	.33	34.93***
Friendship Satisfaction	.48	.26	19.80***
Marriage Satisfaction	.33	.22	16.27***
Employment Status of Wife	.01	-.11	3.34***
Number of Family Wage-Earners	-.01	.10	2.85***
Employment Status	.05	.08	2.67**
Work Satisfaction	.15	.08	2.21**
Financial Satisfaction	.07	-.08	2.18**
Life Satisfaction	.29	.06	1.23
Education Level of Spouse	.09	.06	1.19
Vote Participation	.00	-.05	0.95
Occupational Prestige	.02	-.05	0.93
Church Attendance	-.07	-.05	0.92
Urbanicity	.04	.04	0.56
Age at First Marriage	-.07	-.03	0.35
Ever-Divorced Status	-.04	-.03	0.26
Age	-.13	-.03	0.16
Family Income	.06	-.02	0.14
Residence Satisfaction	.23	-.01	0.05
Household Size	-.03	.01	0.01
Number of Children	-.05	.00	0.00

Multiple R = .63, Adjusted R^2 = .35, F = 8.69, df = 21, 281, $p < .001$

***$p < .001$
**$p < .01$
*$p < .05$